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## Barriers to Local Residents' Participation in Community-Based Tourism: Lessons from Houay Kaeng Village in Laos

Sangkyun Kim<sup>1</sup>, Eerang Park<sup>2</sup>, Toulakham Phandanouvong<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Tourism, School of Humanities and Creative Arts, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Lincoln Business School, College of Social Science, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK

<sup>3</sup>Tourism Marketing Department, Ministry Information, Culture and Tourism, Vientiane Capital, Laos

**Abstract.** This study aims to identify the barriers to local residents' participation in the process of community-based tourism planning and development in a developing country. Focusing on the case of Houay Kaeng Village in Sayabouly Province, Laos, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted by adopting in-depth interviews with the various levels of local community's members. The key barriers to local community participation identified in this research include: (1) low education levels and lack of knowledge about tourism; (2) poor living conditions and lack of financial support; (3) busy daily routine and lack of time for tourism participation; (4) local community's perception of tourism as a seasonal business with low income; and (5) power disparities, institutional disincentives and local's distrust in authorities. The results suggest that only a small number of the local residents in the village were satisfied with their current and on-going participation expressing their strong willingness to continue in participating in the process of tourism planning and development, whereas a large group of the residents were not willing to do it at all in the future. The paper further discusses implications for the government and communities in regard to community-based sustainable tourism development.

### 1 Introduction

Over the last decades the tourism literature contains substantial discussions on sustainable development of tourism. Within this discourse, there is a constant call for partnership and cooperation between all possible stakeholders at all levels, for a clear understanding of the dynamics of stakeholders' attitudes and interests. Especially, it has been highlighted that active participation and involvement of local communities is considered to be a crucial step in the success of sustainable tourism planning and development [1], for they are the ones who are directly affected by the growth of tourism in their locality and its subsequent adverse effects on their way of life and thus their participation is of paramount importance. The idea of community-based sustainable tourism collectively postulates that local residents must maintain control of tourism development by being involved in setting a tourism vision and developing goals and strategies. They also need to participate in implementing strategies as well as operating tourism infrastructures, services and facilities [2-3] for effective management of local resource and better distribution of the benefits of tourism development [4].

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Despite this notion, local communities rarely take part in tourism development activities and often experience a very limited participation in or a complete exclusion from decision-making process [3]. This situation is particularly characterised in developing countries [5-8]. This is because of structural, operational and cultural limitations. Especially, the highly centralised governmental systems of developing countries as a limitation at the operational level make the participation of local communities rarely go beyond mere consultation and information exchange [8]. In this regard, previous studies attempted to examine key factors that influence local community's participation in sustainable tourism planning and development [6, 9], but, it still requires further research on understanding of barriers to local community's participation in tourism planning and development process from the local resident's perspective. Therefore, this study aims to identify key barriers that prevent local residents from being involved in tourism planning and development process within the context of Lao community-based ecotourism. Also, it examines the influence of these barriers on the local community's willingness to participate in the process in future.

The geographical focus of the research is Houay Kaeng Village in Sayabouly Province in the northern part of Laos. In 2009, the Houay Kaeng Village was selected as one of the two main sites for a community-based ecotourism project as part of the Great Mekong Subregion-Sustainable Tourism Development Project (GMS-STDP) funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). As the aims of the GMS-STDP in Laos included poverty reduction, sustainable development, protection of natural and cultural heritage, and protection of vulnerable groups from exploitation [10], the Houay Kaeng Village became a target village with the following reasons. It is because the village has potential ecotourism resources including the Namsai stream, the Houng River, and the medicinal plant forest [11]. Also, Ban Houay Kaeng is a Hmong (one of the Lao indigenous ethnic groups) village that maintains its ethnic character and tradition and has a national-wide reputation for herbal medicine. It is a village with a poorer living condition for its population so that the ADB saw a potential of the village to enhance the protection and conservation of natural, cultural and urban heritage assets of importance for tourism, and to increase the contribution of tourism to poverty reduction by expanding the traditional community-based ecotourism approach [12].

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Local Community's Participation in Tourism Planning and Development**

Local communities, either directly or indirectly, encounter both positive and negative impacts of tourism activities, and thus their participation is crucial to ensure that tourism-generated benefits meet and satisfy their needs [13]. Also, local communities know the nature and characteristics of their tourism products more intimately than outsiders, as the tourism products and activities are often associated with their very rituals, traditions, and cultural values and meanings. It is, thus, local communities who are more likely to know what will fit and what will be appropriate for the local situation in the process of tourism planning and development [14]. For that reason, local communities have been recognised as a pivotal resource and an essential ingredient in every aspect of tourism activities, and Tosun and Timothy assert that participation of local communities is considered to be a crucial step in the success of sustainable tourism [15]. If local communities are empowered to consult with other stakeholders in the planning and decision-making processes about the management and future development of tourism in their areas, there is a greater likelihood that tourism will be more successful and sustainable [16].

Despite the frequent theoretical discussions on the significant role of local community involvement in tourism, it is far more unlikely to be accomplished in practical ways [13]. In many tourist destinations in particular, in developing countries (e.g., Malaysia, China, Botswana, and Iran), local communities seldom take part in tourism planning, development, and management processes and activities [5, 17-20], as highly centralised decision-making systems of such developing countries practice top-down approach referring that everything is controlled and managed by government.

Community is seldom considered as an equal partner, so that practical ways for active participation of locals in decision-making processes is not yet apparent.

## **2.2 Hindering Factors to Community Participation in Tourism Development**

As local community participation is only achieved if factors affecting level of local community participation are well identified and managed, the majority of previous research have attempted to identify factors that facilitate effective local community participation rather than barriers or constraints to it with some exceptions. This might be because success factors can be converted into constraining factors at the same time in a case where they are not favourable for local's participation. Thus, constraints on or barriers to effective community participation can be found by addressing the negative side of each success factor previously identified. Nevertheless, some of the hindering factors can be found regardless of those successful factors. They include lack of awareness and limited capacity of poor local people (e.g., time, expertise, and financial resources), power disparities and distrust in tourism development authorities, and more. These limitations to community participation can be categorised into three dimensional aspects which are cultural, operational and structural [8].

From the cultural limitations' aspect, one of the major constraints on community participation in particular in remote areas of developing countries, is lack of awareness of locals towards the significance of community participation that often results from their low levels of education and inadequate or lack of information about tourism development being made available to them [7]. Furthermore, technical complexity of tourism planning and development process and issues always challenges limited capacity of local community members who are then unconfident and reluctant to take part in any decision-making process. In this regard, Tosun and Timothy assert that since knowledge is an essential element in empowerment, communities need to access a wide range of tourism information through education [15].

The cultural limitations are deeply related to the operational limitations in that poor living conditions and/or low socio-economic status have been also perceived as a constraint in relation to limited capacity of local community. Low level of participation in tourism development project(s) often appear in groups of poor individuals [21]. The main challenge for poor people in many local tourist destinations in the developing world is mere survival, which occupies all their time and energy [8]. These poor residents of host communities usually lack in financial resources or have inadequate facilities to provide for tourists [5]. As such, poor people have only limited opportunities to become involved in community tourism development activities while richer individuals have more opportunities to do so.

Furthermore, the imbalanced power of, and distrust in, tourism development authorities are viewed as a hindering factor that affect to strengthen community participation in tourism planning and development process from both operational and structural levels of limitations [22]. Trust in government institutions is indispensable for gaining political support for the development process and is a basic precondition for effective cooperation between multiple stakeholders. Particularly, lack of trust in tourism authorities makes local people reluctant to accept tourism development activities and their associated changes [22]. Apart from trust, residents who are empowered to take part in consultation and decision-making about tourism management tend to be more satisfied with their community and to be more supportive of tourism activities than those who are less powerful, which is proven in the case of the Langkawi Islands in Malaysia [7]. Yet, it is hard to achieve it in practice as there are more contextually specific hindering factors than the ones identified above. Each of these barriers is closely interrelated to each other and thus it is crucial to understand the mechanism and structures through which they prevent local community members from actively participating in the process of tourism development, which is yet to be examined.

### 3 Research Methods

An exploratory qualitative research approach was adopted for better understanding of the barriers to community-based ecotourism planning and development in Laos considering the richness and depth of information about social, cultural, or touristic phenomenon the research method generates. The primary research data were collected in the form of semi-structured face-to-face indepth interviews with local residents residing in the study area. Due to the bureaucratic system in Laos, the authors initially contacted the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism to issue an official letter requesting the cooperation of the Department of Information, Culture and Tourism (DICT) in Sayabouly Province. One of the authors visited the study site after receiving a letter and met three recommended community leaders of the village. Following this meeting with them, these three community leaders were initially selected as key informants. The snowball sampling technique was then used as an identification tool for another 17 in-depth interviews, which led to a total of 20 local residents being interviewed as of July 2013 in Houay Kaeng Village in Laos. Each interview lasted, approximately, between 40 and 60 minutes. At the end of each interview, the interviewer summarised the key points or ideas provided by each interviewee for his or her confirmation.

For the data analysis, four steps of thematic framework suggested by Ritchie and Lewis [23] were applied: (1) identifying initial themes and constructing an index; (2) labelling the data; (3) sorting the data by theme or concept; and (4) summarising or synthesising the data. In addition, a combination of content analysis technique and textual interpretation was used to clarify the responses.

### 4 Findings

The findings suggest that only a few local residents in Houay Kaeng Village participated in consultation and decision-making process through the meetings and conferences held by the tourism development authorities. These were the community leaders who were assigned as the representatives of the village to take this responsibility. The great majority of local community members were merely excluded from the decision-making process. Despite this exclusion, it is worthwhile to note that the respondents collectively expressed that they would like to take part in tourism development process for the sake of their local community. This is what a respondent commented on why he decided to participate in the project:

I want to protect the rivers and forest in my village because these resources provide food and products for me to eat and sell ... I decided to become involved in community-based ecotourism as it allows me to learn about environmental conservation through the training program, and enables me to protect the natural resources in my locality (**Interviewee no. 7**).

Regardless of the high level of awareness and willingness, the majority of residents in the village, however, did not actively participate in these activities pertaining to tourism planning and development. The five main barriers that prevented them from being involved, at least in this study, include: (1) low education levels and lack of knowledge about tourism; (2) poor living conditions and lack of financial support; (3) busy daily routine and lack of time for tourism participation; (4) local community's perception of tourism as a seasonal business with low income; and (5) power disparities, institutional disincentives and local's distrust in authorities.

#### 4.1 Low Education Level and Lack of Knowledge About Tourism

Despite the local's awareness of the significance of their participation, an inability and incapacity to understand the key objectives and concepts of the provided educational and training programmes have hampered their participation. This finding is different from the one of Marzuki et al.'s study [7] which suggests that the lack of understanding about community participation's importance and the purpose

of tourism development was a constraint in the case of Malaysia. In this regard, the **Interviewee no.13** commented that:

... I heard about it [community-based ecotourism development programme] and attended a meeting as I wanted to participate in it, but I could not read the information they [tourism officers] provided for me ... although they explained it to me, but I was still confused and did not know what it was about. So, I decided not to participate in it at the end.

Furthermore, they had little knowledge about tourism and thus were reluctant to participate in and take responsibility for any aspects of the community-based ecotourism planning and development. Similar to the previous studies which highlighted low level of education as the core barrier to the community participation in tourism planning [6, 8, 13], this study also supports the relationship between local's educational level and lack of confidence in their participation:

Actually, I really want to take part in the guiding service group which is under the community-based ecotourism programme. Unfortunately, I do not know how to communicate with foreign tourists who use the English language as I have no English skills, so I am not confident whether I can get involved in this service (**Interviewee no.16**).

#### **4.2 Poor Living Conditions and Lack of Financial Support**

Most of the community members engage in subsistence farming. Some male residents go to work in the city as construction workers. Through such economic activities they earn an estimated average household income of US\$1,000 per household per year, and thus the majority of poor residents in this village have very poor living conditions and amenities. Although they wished to invest and participate in tourism activities (e.g., sauna and traditional massage, food service, tour guiding, and homestay service), it was merely impossible for them to do so without financial support of the tourism development authorities and/or the Lao government:

I do not have enough money to improve the toilet and to convert a room in my home in order to serve guests ... (**Interviewee no. 11**).

I want to produce and sell some souvenirs to tourists, but I do not have enough money to invest in this service ... (**Interviewee no. 15**).

#### **4.3 Busy Daily Routine and Lack of Time for Tourism Participation**

The community members in Houay Kaeng Village also expressed that their busy daily routine for farming, fishing and finding bamboo shoots for sale and subsequent lack of time for other activities such as tourism-related meetings and training sessions was one of the key constraints to their participation in the project. As Cornwall concluded that self-exclusion may be a pragmatic choice when people perceive that taking part in the development process is time-consuming [24], **The Interviewee no.12** said:

I found it hard to manage my time to attend tourism activities such as meetings and training sessions because I am too busy with my farm work. Every day, I have to get up early to pick some vegetables and collect bamboo shoots for sale at the market. When I get home, it is already late ... I have to do my house chores too...I wish I had more time [for tourism activity].

This finding is consistent with the previous findings [5, 17] in that the local community and full-time employed residents in a rural area are unwilling to take part in ecotourism programme activities

expressing their concern about the negative impact of participation in the tourism-related activities on their primary job.

#### **4.4 Local Community's Perception of Tourism As A Seasonal Business With Low Income**

The majority of local residents in Houay Kaeng Village (who were mainly farmers as mentioned earlier) perceived that the tourism activities under the community-based ecotourism development project were seasonal and generated only little incomes. The respondents claimed that they were not really satisfied with the amount of income gained from tourism in particular, in rainy seasons in which tourists rarely visited the village. The following comments by respondents of this study demonstrate a lack of appreciation of tourism as a means of economic activities:

The number of tourists in my village is quite small, especially in the rainy season, which meant that I could not earn much money from participating in the tour guiding service group. Thus, I don't think I will participate further in this program ... (**Interviewee no. 20**).

I could earn only a little money from selling handicrafts for tourists, particularly in the rainy season which is not enough for my family expenses ... Hence, I will stop participating in the tourism activities ... I want to do other things that can generate more income for me (**Interviewee no. 8**).

#### **4.5 Power Disparities, Institutional Disincentives and Local's Distrust in Authorities**

The respondents of this study thought that the tourism development authorities had the ability to plan and develop community-based ecotourism project without their sincere support and participation. It is because they perceived that the authorities had much expertise in tourism planning and development. In contrast, the great majority of residents expressed that they were less educated and had a lack of experience and knowledge in this context and were thus not provided with an equal opportunity to make decisions on tourism development issues. Although they were encouraged to participate in sharing their ideas and opinions on tourism planning and development issues the community was facing with, only the community leaders were invited to attend the key meetings and conferences. Even, the community leaders perceived power disparities and institutional disincentives due to the tourism development authorities' attitude as **Interviewee no. 10** commented below:

I've never had a chance to make decisions on any issues regarding tourism development in my village ... I used to share my ideas when I attended the meetings, but I felt that they (the tourism officers) did not listen to me ...

The great majority of community members were merely asked to monitor and report what happened to the community in relation to tourism activities. For instance, **Interviewee no. 19** were asked by the tourism officers "to monitor and report to them on the strengths and weaknesses of tourism services such as the massage and homestay services". As they were only asked to monitor and report, they felt excluded and unsure that any of their ideas would be considered or applied in the future tourism development in their village. In this regard, **Interviewee no.13** said:

They (the tourism officers) know how to plan and develop tourism better than me ... I do not want participate in this programme, mainly in the meetings or consultations...well...in fact, I am not invited at all as I am not one of the community leaders... my ideas will not be used in the tourism development activities anyway. Why should I bother?

As such, the above findings suggest that the locals felt sceptical to participate in this process in particular, in relation to the consultation activities regardless of their exclusion except the community leaders.

## 5 Conclusion

The results of this research suggest that the five main barriers to the local residents' participation in community-based ecotourism planning and development affect not only little practicality of community's engagement in tourism activities, but also a low level of willingness to future participation in tourism-related decision making process. The findings provide implications for the government and communities. The lack of knowledge and understanding about tourism development process among local residents is found as the core limitation in Houay Kaeng Village. Despite of the existing awareness of the importance of community-based ecotourism development, lacks of knowledge and skills how to develop and manage own tourism-related businesses and activities decrease community's level of confidence; in turn, many poor residents do not appreciate positive impact of tourism but express less interest in tourism planning and development. Regarding this, education and training provided by different levels of government should focus on the practical aspect of tourism development and management. Coupled with financial support from the government, skills and knowledge obtained by hands-on training can change the local's attitude toward participation in tourism planning and development. Given the fact that the local communities are the ones who are closely affected by tourism and expected to become an integral part of tourism products [25], local residents who have better skills and knowledge are likely to have strong attachment to the community and get actively involved in community-based tourism development. To do so, the local communities also need to be empowered in order to not only make decision what forms of tourism facilities and programmes they want to develop in their respective communities. In addition, they should be able to decide how the tourism costs and benefits will be shared among different stakeholders. Throughout the process, local residents are empowered to plan and develop tourism for their life and benefits in the communities, so that individuals' active participation in tourism-related issues and practices can assist a successful community-based sustainable tourism development.

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